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On the track of the
"Arkansas Traveler"

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On the tracks of the
Arkansas Traveler

ON THE TRACK OF "THE ARKANSAS TRAVELER."

SOMETIME about the year 1850 the American musical myth known as "The Arkansas Traveler" came into vogue among fiddlers. It is a quick reel tune, with a backwoods story talked to it while played, that caught the ear at "side shows" and circuses, and sounded over the trodden turf of fair grounds. Bands and foreign-bred musicians were above noticing it, but the people loved it and kept time to it, while tramps and sailors carried it across seas to vie merrily in Irish cabins with "The Wind that Shakes the Barley" and "The Soldier's Joy." With or without the dialogue, the music was good for the humor, and it would have shown to the musical antiquary, if he had noticed it, the boundary line between the notes of nature and the notes of art as clearly as "Strasburg" or "Prince Eugene" or "The Boyne Water" or "Dixie."

It lost nothing where showmen caught it from Western adventurers in the days before the Union Pacific Railroad, and gained vogue in the hands of negro minstrels, who, if they touched up the dialogue, never gave the flavor of cities and theaters to the outdoor tune. When the itinerant doctor made a stage of his wagon-top of a Saturday night, it helped the sale of quack medicines on the village square, and there was a tapping of feet in the crowd under the torches when a blackened orchestra set the tune going from fiddle to fiddle.

I learned of the myth nearly thirty years ago from Major G. D. Mercer, who had brought it from the Southwest in the pioneer days and played the tune on the violin as it should be played to the dialogue.

First there comes a slow, monotonous sawing of the notes, which prepares one, as the curtain rises, for a scene in the backwoods of Arkansas.

The sun is setting over the plains. A belated horseman in coonskin cap, and well belted with pistol and bowie-knife, rides up to a squatter cabin to ask a night's lodging. By the door of a rotting shanty sits a ragged man astride of a barrel, slowly scraping out the notes you hear. There are children in the background, and a slatternly woman stands on the threshold. The man on the barrel plays away, paying no attention to the visitor, and the dialogue begins.

"Hello, stranger!" says the horseman.

"Hello yourself!"

"Can you give me a night's lodging?"

"No room, stranger."

The playing goes on.

"Can't you make room?"

"No, sir; it might rain."

"What if it does rain?"

"There's only one dry spot in this house, and me and Sal sleeps on that."

The playing continues for some time. Then the horseman asks:

"Which is the way to the Red River Crossing?"

The fiddler gives no answer, and the question is repeated.

"I've lived hyar twenty years, and never knowed it to have a crossin'."

The stranger then begins to tease, the tune still playing.

"Why don't you put a roof on the house?"

"What?"

"Why don't you put a roof on the house?"

"When it's dry I don't want a roof; when it's wet I can't."

The tune goes on.

"What are you playing that tune over so often for?"

"Only heard it yisterday. 'Fraid I'll forget it."

"Why don't you play the second part of it?"

"I've knowed that tune ten years, and it ain't got no second part."

The crisis of the story has come.

"Give me the fiddle," says the stranger.

The man hands it to him, and a few moments of tuning are needed as a prelude to what follows, which has been immortalized in the popular print here shown, known as "The Turn of the Tune."

When the stranger strikes up, turning away into the unknown second part with the heel-tingling skill of a true jig-player, the whole scene is set in motion. The squatter leaps up, throws out his arms, and begins a dance; the dog wags his tail; the children cut capers; and the "old woman" comes out, twisting her hard face into a smile.

"Walk in, stranger," rings the squatter's voice. "Tie up your horse 'side of ol' Ball. Give him ten ears of corn. Pull out the demi-

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The turn of the tune.

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«THE ARKANSAS TRAVELER.»

A version arranged for the piano by Mr. P. D. Benham, editor of «The Arkansas Traveler» of Chicago.

john and drink it all. Stay as long as you please. If it rains, sleep on the dry spot.»

The legend, like all myths, has many variants. Mr. Benham, editor of the Chicago «Arkansas Traveler,» and Mr. T. R. Cole of Charleston, West Virginia, have given me versions with more varied dialogues; but the colloquy as to night's lodging, roof, and tune remains about the same, and the student of folk-lore is left to trace

its threads of fancy in whatever directions they lead.

I found, to my surprise, the episode of the roof among the memorabilia of York Harbor, Maine,¹ where the legend exists that about 1832 Betty Potter and Esther Booker lived on the dividing line between York and Kittery, in a cabin with a large hole in the roof. One

¹ «Gorgeana and York,» by Alexander Emery, 1874, p. 207.

rainy day some ramblers, finding the women boring holes in the floor to let through the drip, asked the following questions and got the following answers:

«Why don't you mend the hole in the roof, Miss Potter?»

«Can't do it; it rains so.»

«Why don't you do it when it don't rain?»

«No need of it then.»

«The Arkansas Traveler» is not mentioned among the border anecdotes in «Beyond the Mississippi,» by A. D. Richardson,¹ nor in Burton's «Cyclopedia of Wit and Humor,»² and Professor Child of Harvard told me, when I wrote to him about it in 1884, that he had made no study of the ballad-like myth. But it must have traveled to Ireland somewhere in the fifties, as Daniel Sullivan, a famous fiddler who played it for me at 815 Albany street, Boston, in 1885, had probably learned it when a young man at Limerick.

There may be many other stories and fiddle tunes with which it might be compared, though I have heard only one, called «The Lock Boat after the Scow» (with the music as follows), played on the violin, and told me by Mr. George Long of Doylestown, Pennsylvania, before 1880.





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THE ARKANSAW TRAVELER.

SCENE IN THE BACKWOODS OF ARKANSAS

Traveler: to Squatter, can you give me some refreshments and a night's lodging? Squatter no sir, haven't got any room, nothing to eat. Fiddles away. Traveler: where does this road go to? Squatter it don't go any where, it stays here. Still fiddling. Traveler: why don't you play the rest of that tune? Squatter, don't know it. Traveler, here give me the fiddle, plays

demise of Bret Harte would be an event of the highest possible advantage to California. All of this produces an atmosphere of solemnity, which, taking possession of our spirits, might threaten to become serious, were we not inclined, after mature consideration, to take advantage of the best remedy at hand, simple but sure. This consists in asking in one of our old friends to tell the story and to play the tune.

In the face of these difficulties it is no easy matter to learn more than that Colonel Sanford C. Faulkner (born in Scott County, Kentucky, March 3, 1803; died in Little Rock, August 4, 1874) was the originator of the story, its hero, and in fact the Arkansas Traveler himself.

Mr. Benham tells me that in the State campaign of 1840, Colonel Faulkner, Hon. A. H. Sevier, Governor Fulton, Chester Ashley, and Governor Yell, traveling through the Boston Mountains (Mr. S. H. Newlin, of «The Arkansas Farmer,» Little Rock, says it was Colonel «Sandy» Faulkner and Captain Albert Pike in Yell County), halted at a squatter's cabin for information. Colonel «Sandy,» who was the spokesman, and no mean fiddler himself, had some sort of bantering talk with the squatter, who was sawing at a tune on

a violin, and finally played the second part of it for him. Out of this, say my informants, grew the «good story» which the colonel, on his return, was called upon to tell at a dinner given in the once famous bar-room near the Anthony House in Little Rock. Years afterward he told it again at a State banquet in New Orleans, when the Governor of Louisiana handed him a violin and asked him to regale the company with the then celebrated narrative.

In New Orleans his fame abode with him, for Mr. Benham adds the curious bit of information that at the old St. Charles Hotel a special room was devoted to his use, bearing over the door in gilt letters the words «The Arkansas Traveler.» Mr. N. L. Prentiss, editor of the Topeka (Kansas) «Commonwealth,» says that Colonel Faulkner's violin was offered for sale in Little Rock in 1876 for one hundred dollars.

Mr. George E. Dodge of Little Rock wrote me in 1892, in contradiction of most of the above, that the story of Colonel Faulkner and the squatter was a pure fiction without a happening-place, «either invented by Faulkner or by some of his friends, who delighted in hearing him tell it and play the tune, and made him the central figure of it more for a joke than anything else.»



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THE TURN OF THE TUNE.

TRAVELER PLAYING THE "ARKANSAS TRAVELER"

Squatter: Why stranger I've been trying four years to git the turn of that tune, come right in! Johnny take the horse and feed him! Wife git up the best Corn coker, you can make! Sally make up the best bed! He kin play the turn of that tune; come right in and play it all through stranger. You kin lodge with us a month free of charge

But however that might have been, a local artist, Edward Washburn by name, once living at Dardanelle, Arkansas, was so much impressed with the story that he took it into his head, about 1845-50, to paint the originals of the prints here copied. As he then lived with the family of Mr. Dodge in Little Rock, he made the children pose for his sketches. Mr. G. E. Dodge was the boy in the ash-hopper, «and we had great times,» says he, now fifty years after, «posing for his figures of the squatter's children. I was constantly with him in his studio, and in fact felt that I was helping to paint the picture. The picture representing (The Turn of the Tune) was an afterthought. The boy in the ash-hopper gets down from his perch and takes the stranger's horse. The children assume different attitudes. But we never celebrated the completion of the second painting as we had that of the first. Poor Washburn sickened and died, and the unfinished work stood upon the easel until it was stowed away. His executor afterward had it finished by some one else, and then the two began to make their appearance in the form of cheap prints.»

Another picture, by another painter, which hung in the Arkansas Building at the Centen-

nial Exhibition at Philadelphia, had been worked up from photographs of Mr. Dodge, his brothers and sisters, lent to the painter by the boy in the ash-hopper.

The tune has a strong flavor of the cotton-field «hoe-down,» but I have obtained no satisfactory information as to its origin. Mr. Benham is sure that it was not composed by Colonel Faulkner, and has heard, perhaps to the surprise of musical antiquaries, that it was either written by José Tasso, a famous violin-player who died in Kentucky some years ago, or produced by him from an old Italian melody. When we come to investigate this relation of Tasso to «The Arkansas Traveler» the whole question becomes confused by repeated assertions that Tasso not only composed the music, but was himself the original of the myth, leaving Faulkner out of the question altogether.

In fact, common opinion on the Ohio River awards the authorship to Tasso hardly less positively than on the lower Mississippi the authorship is given exclusively to Faulkner; and it would not be a popular task to try to convince the «old-timers» of Maysville, Point Pleasant, and Gallipolis that Faulkner, of whom they never heard, or any one else except their oft-quoted favorite, had anything to do

with the origin of the myth. Their recollections make it certain that Tasso was well known along the river as a concert and dance player when the tune came into vogue. Robert Clarke, the publisher, heard him play it at John Walker's brew-house in Cincinnati in 1841 or 1842, and he told Richard R. Reynolds and Albert Crell, who played with him at a ball at the Burnet House on New Year's night in 1849, that he himself was the author of music and story. Mr. Curry, who used to play the flute to him when he was ill, heard him repeat the statement about 1850; but Tasso's grandson, Mr. F. G. Spinning, does not think that his grandfather ever traveled in Arkansas, and it may be doubted whether the jocosely performer, who from dramatic necessity was led to make himself the hero of the story, ever claimed the authorship without winking one eye.

Whether he could equal Faulkner at the dialogue or not, he seems to have brought down the house with the tune in a way to outdo all competitors; and one anecdote after another connects him with it in the days of the glory of Mississippi steamboats and when

Colt's revolvers first came down the river. One after another, these tales vouch for a fame so attractive that the listener is half willing to give up Faulkner and let Tasso walk off with the honors.

Yet the latter, who spoke broken English until the day of his death in Covington, Kentucky in 1887, was born in the city of Mexico, of Italian parents, was educated in France, and was, it is said, a pupil of Berlioz; so that it may be questioned whether, even if, as alleged, he came to Ohio in the thirties, he could have so steeped himself in the spirit of the American West as to produce the story. The investigation might lead us much further, but it is doubtful if more facts gathered about the fable would add to its interest.

It really matters little where the «Traveller» was born, whether in Yell County or in the Boston Mountains; whether, as Mr. Dodge asserts, it originated with Faulkner and his friends, or came from the humor of Tasso. Like all true creations of fancy, it eludes definite description and defies criticism, while the notes of the tune sound a gay disregard of boards of immigration and State statistics.

H. C. Mercer.

JOHN RANDOLPH OF ROANOKE.

RECOLLECTIONS AND UNPUBLISHED LETTERS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF «HOME REMINISCENCES OF JOHN RANDOLPH.»



IN the year 1817 Mr. Francis W. Gilmer of Albemarle, one of the most accomplished scholars that Virginia has produced, published a small volume in which he gave sketches of several of the great orators of the day, among them John Randolph of Roanoke. A copy of this book was presented by the author to Mr. Randolph, who acknowledged the receipt of it in a long letter, which is now presented to the public for the first time; but in order that the reader may properly appreciate it, it is necessary to give first an extract from the book concerning Mr. Randolph's style of oratory. Mr. Gilmer wrote:

The first time that I ever felt the spell of eloquence was when a boy standing in the gallery of the Capitol in the year 1808. It was on the floor of that House I saw rise a gentleman who in every quality of his person, his voice, his mind, his character, is a phenomenon among men. . . . He has so long spoken

in parables that he now thinks in them. Antitheses, jests, beautiful conceits, with a striking turn and point of expression, flow from his lips with the same natural ease, and often with singular felicity of expression, as regular series of arguments follow each other in the deduction of logical thinkers. His invective, which is always piquant, is frequently adorned with the beautiful metaphors of Burke, and animated by bursts of passion worthy of Chatham. Popular opinion has ordained Mr. Randolph the most eloquent speaker now in America.

It has been objected to this gentleman that his speeches are desultory and unconnected. It is true; but how far that may be a fault is another question. We are accustomed in America to look upon the bar as furnishing the best and nearly the only models of good speaking. In legal discussions a logical method, accurate arrangement, and close concatenation of arguments are essential, because the mode of reasoning is altogether artificial and the principles on which we rely positive and conventional. Not so in parliamentary debate. There questions are considered on principles of general policy and justice; and the topics



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